

1 Combining expertise from linguistics and tourism: a tale of two cities

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Abstract

This case study presents the results of an interdisciplinary Virtual Exchange (VE) that was arranged between Finnish and Polish students in 2019. During their six-week collaboration, the students of language studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, worked in teams together with their Polish peers specialising in information and communications technology and management in tourism at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The international teams combined their linguistic and tourism-promotion expertise, and, using collaborative digital tools, grappled with the tasks of analysing the official municipal city websites and promoting the lesser-known aspects of their sister cities (Jyväskylä and Poznań) in jointly created videos.

Keywords: virtual exchange, interdisciplinarity, employability skills, digital literacy, promotional discourse.

1. Context

Most of today's workplaces require competent, tech-savvy, and culturally aware graduates who are able to collaborate online, going beyond geographic, political, and cultural borders (Turula, Kurek, & Lewis, 2019). VE is defined as “online

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intercultural interaction and collaboration with students from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their education programmes” (O’Dowd, 2018, p. 1). Paradoxically, despite its virtual nature, VE prepares the students for the real world by enhancing their working life skills, such as digital literacies, intercultural collaboration competencies, and foreign language skills.

VE projects allow for interdisciplinarity because students from different degree programmes can work together. This way the students broaden their multiliteracy repertoires (Luke, 2002) by building on their peers’ expertise and viewing problems from new perspectives. As pointed out by Neumeyer and McKenna (2016) and Bosque-Pérez et al. (2016), members of interdisciplinary student teams engage in authentic dialogues, improve their communication skills, solve problems in a holistic way, and gain unique insights.

This case study discusses an interdisciplinary VE which involved students of language studies (n=12) from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and students specialising in information and communications technology and management in tourism (n=13) from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The Finnish students were majoring in foreign languages and had expertise in the study and analysis of language use and discourse. The Polish students were in the second semester of their four-semester graduate studies (MA), doing a language course, *English for Tourism*.

The project was called ‘Combining expertise from linguistics and tourism: a tale of two cities told in videos’ and lasted for six weeks during the spring term of 2019. The international teams of four to five students had to explore, discuss, and promote the lesser-known aspects of their cities, Jyväskylä and Poznań. As the main outcome of the collaboration, each group created a joint promotional video of the two sister cities. The project had relevance for both the tourism and the language students. The Polish students had an opportunity to work in English on a real-life scenario in the field of tourism. The language majors from Finland could apply their knowledge of foreign languages and discourse theories in practice.

The teachers had met in 2018 during an online course on VE, which was offered by EVOLVE (Evidence-Validated Online Learning through Virtual Exchange). EVOLVE is an initiative that aims to mainstream VE as an innovative form of collaborative international learning across disciplines in higher education. Both teachers saw interdisciplinary collaboration as a great opportunity for their students to internationalise at home and to practise 21st century skills (Beelen, 2019; Rubin, 2019). Their idea was supported and later mentored by two experts, Mirjam Hauck and Juan Alba Duran from the EVOLVE team, who provided guidance and regular feedback prior to, during, and after the project.

2. Aims and description of the project

Building on the sister city connection between Jyväskylä and Poznań, the VE aimed to enhance the students' online intercultural collaboration skills by bringing their educational experience as close to real life as possible. By working in autonomous international teams, they could develop the skills essential in any career: critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication, digital literacy, as well as interpersonal skills, such as initiative, flexibility, and productivity.

Another important aim was to raise the students' awareness of promotional discourse in tourism by exploring the potentials of multimodal meaning-making through a critical analysis of the official websites of their respective cities. In this way the students were meant to gain new insights in multimodal content creation and use them in practice. By the end of the project, students from both countries were expected to be able to formulate critical views of municipal website discourse, produce their own creative promotional materials with a new digital tool, and reflect critically on the experience of intercultural online collaboration. The project description was published by EVOLVE on their website (<https://evolve-erasmus.eu/collaboration/jyu-amu-1000/>).

With regard to the learning outcomes, the emphasis was placed on foreign language skill improvement, especially in the case of the Polish students,

who had been taught English in monolingual classes and had not had many opportunities to use English in authentic and meaningful communicative situations. An intercultural project such as this proved ideal for them since it ran parallel to the core subject module involving the current tourism trends and promotion of Poznań among international tourists. For the Finnish students, who did the VE as a separate module, the project was a form of internationalisation at home (Garam, 2012; Weimer, Hoffman, & Silvonen, 2019) and an opportunity to work with students outside their discipline. For them, the main learning outcomes were to learn how to use their linguistic expertise in a supportive way and to get experienced in collaborative video-creation.

To ensure that the students were on the right track to achieving the intended goals, the Finnish and Polish teachers regularly met their students during on-campus classes to offer pedagogical mentoring and to discuss various aspects of teamwork, and technology-mediated and intercultural communication (O'Dowd, Sauro, & Spector-Cohen, 2019).

3. Pedagogical design and tools

The teachers chose to use Gilly Salmon's (n.d.) *five stage model* as a scaffold for a structured sequence of the online activities. The model emphasises the need for easy access of students to the VE platform, a range of well chosen team-building activities, collaborative tasks that strongly focus on the learning outcomes, team-orientated knowledge construction, and – last but not least – review and reflection (Salmon, n.d.). The values that the teachers of the present project selected to serve as the pillars of VE were trust, communication, clarity, and predictability.

When it came to the choice of social networking tools to be used during the project, the teachers opted for Google Suite, as most participants had already had access to and experience with some of its applications. Google Classroom was chosen as the main hub for information exchange between teachers and students, and Google Hangouts for group (teacher-students) video-meetings. As

the recourse to Google tools required disclosure of personal gmail addresses, the teachers asked the students for their consent and informed them about the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) policy adopted in the project. The students also signed privacy waivers for research purposes.

It was decided that the student output (introductions, weekly reports, final products) would be presented on a Padlet, since this application was free and very intuitive for novice users. It also allowed to display information in various modalities and kept all student work neatly organised in one place. In addition to the three tools that were mandatory (Padlet, Google Classroom, and Google Hangouts – later replaced by Zoom), the students were free to choose the applications for their team communication and collaboration (Messenger, WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Google Docs, Vimeo, YouTube, etc.). The students were also allowed discretion in deciding how to share the workload in their groups, determining their weekly work schedules, and choosing the themes to be pursued. The need to negotiate various project-related aspects of their group collaboration mirrored the challenges which real-life office teams deal with on a regular basis.

As successful group work depends heavily on group dynamics (Becker, 2003), great emphasis was placed on the team-building activities. Student introduction took place in three stages: introductions in the form of text and image on a Padlet, oral presentations during the opening video-conference with all participants and the teachers present, and finally, more personal exchanges in their groups' virtual meetings. It was in their small groups that the students got to know each other and created a group identity. Among the first tasks was choosing a group name, having a small talk on hobbies, and sharing the results of a survey they had conducted in their own country prior to the start of the project. The survey's aim was to find out how much the students in Poznań or in Jyväskylä knew about the other country and the sister city, and what potential motivation they might have for making visits there.

As the next step, the students analysed and compared the two cities' official websites, focusing on the language, graphic design, professed values, and the

marketing strategies. The students were asked in particular to evaluate how much the municipal website of their partners appealed to potential young visitors from their own country. They also had to make suggestions on remedying the deficiencies of the official city website. Each group presented their conclusions in a comparative report, which was shared on the project's Padlet.

As the work progressed, the group activities became more complex and required more creativity. When designing their own promotional materials, the students were encouraged to present their respective cities in a new light. Of particular importance was showcasing those aspects of their cities that were not well known but had a potential to attract young visitors. After some brainstorming, each group had to agree on a common theme and then do some fieldwork to collect the necessary materials by taking photos and recording short videos with authentic scenes of city life. They also had to find suitable background music published on free licences, devise text graphics for the video, and combine all these elements into one convincing, multimodal piece of promotional material revolving around a chosen theme. The latter part was a particularly challenging and stressful element of the project due to the tight deadlines. The workload was intense, but all the groups succeeded in creating the promotional videos, which were shared on a Padlet.

The final stage of the project focused on evaluation and reflection. During the closing video-conference, the students discussed their VE experience and compared their strategies of coping with the challenges. They evaluated their own promotional materials as well as those of their partners. They also expressed their emotions about what they deemed useful and difficult by drawing their own mind-maps and commenting on the maps made by their fellow participants. When asked to focus on a critical moment of the collaboration process, they closely examined an event of their choice and discussed it with the teachers and their peers. Both activities were adopted from Małgorzata Kurek's (2015) rich repertoire of collaborative tasks. The individual e-portfolios completed weekly by the students showcased their activities, attitudes, expectations, and lessons learnt at each stage of the six-week VE, creating a vivid record of the progress made during the project.

4. Evaluation, assessment, and recognition

Despite numerous obstacles (inclement weather, illnesses, misunderstandings, local holidays, unreliable Internet connections, and other technical issues), all the teams managed to produce their promotional videos on time. Only one out of the six videos was patched up from two separate parts about Jyväskylä and Poznań, as the students involved ran out of time in snowy weather, did not get the right footage, and were unable to discuss a better combination of images. All the groups focused on diverse aspects of their sister cities. They were proud of the final products and drew enormous satisfaction from successful overcoming of linguistic, intercultural, interpersonal, and technical issues which cropped up along the way.

In order to get credit for the VE project, the students were required to complete all individual and group assignments, such as posting their personal introductions on a Padlet, presenting the results of the introductory survey on the two cultures, and completing the six weekly reports on international collaboration with records of synchronous and asynchronous group communication and online meetings (e.g. group photos, screenshots of messages, and students' quotes). The students were also required to actively participate in the opening and closing video-conferences and individually submit a full reflective e-portfolio. The pass/fail grading system was used.

Both the Finnish and Polish participants were volunteers and, as such, were highly motivated to engage in interactions with international students using English as a lingua franca. As a form of international recognition, all participants received digital badges issued by EVOLVE to be displayed on social media platforms such as LinkedIn. They also received official certificates, issued by their respective universities, acknowledging their participation in VE. Both the certificates and the digital badges were highly appreciated by the students and some participants used them later in the job recruitment process, in scholarship and Erasmus+ grant applications, and in other situations. For the Polish students the VE project was worth 50% of the total credit for their English course (spring semester), which is two ECTS points. The Finnish students got three ECTS points.

Student feedback on the collaboration process was extremely positive. The anonymised individual e-portfolios provide vivid testimony that teamwork was going well in most cases. There were difficult times at the production stage, but all the groups were able to overcome their problems using various group-developed strategies. The class discussions, the students' reports, and e-portfolios reveal that the overwhelming majority of participants felt that VE was an extremely valuable experience. They believed it was relevant for their future working lives and saw it as a great opportunity to develop their transversal and intercultural skills. Let us share some excerpts from the individual e-portfolios.

One Finnish student wrote:

“From the entire virtual exchange project, I learned that working in a multicultural team using only technology can be challenging at times but it is also rewarding as you can save time, money, and meet new people and learn more about other countries and cultures by sitting at your computer at home. It was nice to see how we were able to help each other see things we might not have thought about otherwise. The Polish students are tourism majors, whereas the Finnish students are language students, and because we represented different study fields, we were able to utilize our personal skills and combine our knowledge to produce a promotional video for the two cities. This demonstrates well how a team does not have to meet physically in person in order to work well together, and this experience also shows how intercultural communication does not always have to mean miscommunication”.

Another one observed:

“I learned from this experience that it is important to view familiar things through the eyes of a tourist/stranger to get a new perspective and notice things I hadn't noticed before. I also learned that in different cultures the same assignment can be understood very differently or the effort may differ. I stayed calm and thanked for the effort even if in my mind I felt slight irritation. It resembled working life, I guess, but also

taught me group work skills: you have to get results with what you have and you cannot control everything, despite that, the result may be good because the other party has done their part nevertheless”.

And still another noted:

“I felt a bit sad that the project is over. It felt like it would take a long time and suddenly it was over. However, I am happy I participated in this project. It is a useful skill to learn to communicate and plan things together with people you are not able to see”.

One Polish student observed:

“To sum up the project was very interesting, I'm glad that I took part in it. I can meet new people and new culture [sic], I'm so happy. Thank you! We made [a] really nice movie and thanks to this I am more confident using English”.

5. Lessons learnt and conclusion

What the participants of the Polish-Finnish VE seemed to cherish the most was the chance to use English in an authentic setting and the opportunity to work in autonomous teams. The students' sense of agency and the ability to communicate across cultural divides significantly boosted their self-esteem and helped them to see the value of their own linguistic skills. The promotional videos, which were the final outcomes of the project, showed that the students enjoyed the collaboration. They could overcome disciplinary, cultural, and language barriers when engaging in creative teamwork. Most of them gave very positive feedback on the project, pointing out its relevance for working life.

As the teachers of the project, we learnt about the importance of having a similar level of commitment and work ethics. The project required a jointly developed pedagogical design, which meant a lot of planning and negotiation. The chosen

tasks had to be challenging but attainable and, whenever possible, simulate real-life scenarios. It was also worthwhile to have the support of the EVOLVE mentors and more experienced colleagues. It was essential that both of us had a clear overview of the schedule, the assignments, and the assessment. We also learnt that the students need constant support and encouragement from their teachers. On-campus guidance combined with emailing and reminders posted in the project's online platform proved to work well.

VE requires a great deal of commitment, discipline, and patience from both the teachers and students. VE projects are meant for individuals who are willing to put their heart and soul in the process. Trust and close collaboration are the keys to successful completion of the tasks (Rico, Alcover, Sánchez-Manzanares, & Gil, 2009). Notwithstanding the effort, VE is extremely rewarding and provides opportunities for personal and professional growth for everyone (Hauck, 2007).

VE offers something that traditional classes organised for monolingual and mono-disciplinary groups at the same fluency level are unable to provide: authentic language use, curiosity about the outside world, an opportunity to see your own culture from a new perspective, and a genuinely international experience. VE is a cost-effective way of bringing schools closer to real life and it prepares graduates for the demands of future culturally diverse societies and the globalised labour market. Although VE is unlikely to replace physical mobility, it can still offer real-life intercultural experiences at home to a vast majority of students and motivate them to venture outside of their comfort zone.

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